



The Commonwealth

'Law, Humanity and the Commonwealth'

A Joint Seminar of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the British Red Cross

**Opening remarks by The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland QC
Secretary-General of the Commonwealth**

Monday, 13 June 2016

Excellencies, distinguished guests, Commonwealth friends...

Remember the victims in the Orlando shooting where 50 have died and 50 more lay injured in hospital, many fighting for their lives. Killed by an adherent to an ideology which bears no relation to real religion and which doesn't recognise the joint and indivisible humanity of all mankind.

99.9 per cent of DNA of every human being in this world is identical which makes us a family, something which we have in the Commonwealth understanding. 53 countries, 2.3 billion people, on third of the world's population joined by one set of values and our Charter, and why this conference is so important.

If we want to build our social capital and put the wealth back into the Commonwealth and common back into the wealth, we have do so by working together.

International humanitarian law deals with much more than conflict. It addresses first and foremost our 'humanity', the humanity and dignity of all Commonwealth citizens.

The Commonwealth and the British Red Cross share these principles of humanity and dignity, which are deeply entrenched in our values. We promote international humanitarian law in our member states through training, capacity building and working with governments to develop model laws and legal policy. Pooling our expertise to strengthen our ability to respond to the common problems which face us. Saving time, money, and saving and improving lives.

Here today, in this room, we are seeing the implementation of SDGs in action. Only through partnerships, through working together and harnessing our collective resources, can we make real lasting change. Collaboration and cooperation between governments, alongside humanitarian and international development actors is critical if we are to successfully deliver the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16 for justice and peaceful societies.

We also need mechanisms to facilitate more cooperation and collaboration, and one of our contributions will be to create a Commonwealth Office of Civil and Criminal Justice Reform so we can work more closely together, building on the Common Law, and the similarities of our systems of justice, governance, administration and education.

The Arms Trade Treaty

At the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Malta last year, our leaders collectively encouraged all member states to ratify the Arms Trade Treaty, acknowledging that violations of international humanitarian law and illicit weapon trading lead to conflict and instability, and hinders our social and economic development.

25 Commonwealth countries have ratified the Arms Trade Treaty, while 15 are signatories but have not yet ratified. It is encouraging that all our Caribbean member state have ratified the Treaty, and it would be inspiring to see all regions of the Commonwealth following suit.

Our collective stance on this Treaty is firmly rooted in our Charter, which states: 'We support international efforts for peace and disarmament at the United Nations and other multilateral institutions...We will be guided by our commitment to the security, development and prosperity of every member state.'

The Arms Trade Treaty will be on the agenda of the upcoming Meeting of Senior Officials of Law Ministries and Meeting of Law Ministers of Small Jurisdictions in October this year and I hope we will concentrate on finding ways to help all our members to take the practical steps needed to make sure all our members have what they need to make it possible to sign and implement the Treaty.

Violence against women

Violence against women is now firmly set as a priority area of work by the Commonwealth. High levels of sexual violence have long been known to occur during armed conflicts, sadly natural disasters are also now increasingly recognised to be triggers for heightened rates of sexual assault. I thank Her Excellency Nazhat Shameen Khan, Fiji's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, for generously giving her time today to share with us her country's experience.

Natural disasters now occur more widely and more often because of changing climate patterns, and our smaller Commonwealth members often bear the brunt of these catastrophic events. Having legal frameworks in place to respond to such natural disasters and reduce the incidence of sexual assault is an essential factor in protecting the security and dignity of our citizens. Our Commonwealth Secretariat Rule of Law Division will be giving an overview of their research on this issue later today.

The protection of cultural property

As the International Criminal Court opened its first case last year dealing with destruction of cultural heritage in Mali, it is important for Commonwealth countries to be aware of their obligations in protecting

cultural property. I am glad we have Anna Segall of UNESCO with us for our seminar today.

Conclusion

I am now in the tenth week of my term as Secretary-General. As I have travelled to member states, and engaged closely with a wide range of representatives of our citizens, I have become more strongly persuaded than ever of the way in which the Commonwealth can be an influence for good in this world: whether by helping to mobilise the relief efforts of our member states following natural disasters, by advancing universal access to quality healthcare provision, by providing inclusive and equitable opportunities for our young people, or by promoting adherence to international humanitarian law.

There are many other ways in which I am determined for the Commonwealth to be a leader and a pioneer, looked up to by the wider world, as an exemplar and facilitator of good practice, and with readily accessible ways of sharing know-how and technical expertise between regions and member states.

In this world when we our theme celebrates 'An Inclusive Commonwealth', it is good to be working in partnership with all of you towards building a safer, more respectful and inclusive world for Commonwealth citizens.

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